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Informacy

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Abstract

In this article the author discusses the present IT and telecommunication scenario in India and the opportunity offered by the international market. To tap this expanding market, he conceptualises user education exercises and Informacy programme at various levels leading to developing information oriented culture in the society.

1. GLOBAL SCENARIO

During the past decade, spurred by liberalised economic policies, several developing countries in Asia are experiencing high rates of economic growth and emerging as newly industrialised economies (NIEs). In this process, the NIEs find it necessary to be competitive both in the domestic and global markets for sustaining their economic growth. Thus, a strong information and communication technologies (ICT) infrastructure at the local and national levels is a crucial enabling factor. They are realising that investment in ICT could not only improve productivity and efficiency in various sectors of the economy but the ICT industries by themselves could contribute significantly to national product, and a favourable balance of trade.

Internationally, in the past year, 'Information Superhighway' (ISH) and 'Global Information Infrastructure' (GII) have become new buzzwords in the information industry. These are an integral part of the US Administration's plan to build a seamless web of communication networks, interconnecting computers, databases, and consumer electronics. Everyone irrespective of his or her geographical location, occupation, age, race or creed, can access a great variety and vast amounts of information when needed. The creation of this network of networks is seen as a prerequisite to sustainable economic progress for all members of the human family [1].

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The rapidly growing Internet has become the backbone of the ISH, the eventual goal of which is to enable the effective transfer of data in the form of audio, text, and video in real-time, across computer networks and make the services available to everyone.

Thus, the ISH and GII are emerging realities. The trends and developments in ICT strategies and policies of developed countries affect informatics and telematics, and public policy formulation in developing countries in ICT and other sectors. The countries of Asia that are already building up their respective national information infrastructures find it necessary to build highways and 'footpaths' to the ISH to derive optimal benefits from the GII.

2. ICT IN INDIA

The Information Technology (IT) Industry in India grew by some 44 percent, the software industry by 55 percent, and the domestic market exceeded software exports in 1994-1995. The growth has been impressive during the last five years [2].

However, we form only a miniscule part of the global IT market, and the domestic computer per person ratio is also quite small in comparison to other NIEs in the region [3]. In the telecom sector also we are making progress, but the use of telecommunications is largely confined to the urban areas and concentrated in a few cities. It has yet to make headway among the vast rural population, so that the telephone per person ratio can compare favourably with the corresponding figures in the industrialising economies of Asia or the world average [4, 5].

There are several reasons for this scenario. One is the very large population with over 75 percent in rural areas, and all its implications. Secondly, the surge in IT development in India is hardly five years old, since economic liberalisation was launched in mid-1991. With the consequent globalisation, the country has found it necessary to become competitive at global and at the domestic levels. Widening the scope of the applications of IT in the manufacturing and service sectors, and development of telecommunications are now crucial in this competitive environment. Also, the Indian IT industry by itself is now shown to contribute significantly to the national product, as has been noted in other NIEs. Yet, IT is not affordable to the vast majority of the potential single user/home user in India. Another important cause for the relatively slow spread of IT and telecommunications use is the absence of a dynamic information culture in the country. Creation of an informative society [6] is largely dependent upon a supporting dynamic information culture. The development of such a culture is an integral part of human resources development.

3. USER EDUCATION EXERCISES

Libraries, information systems, centres and services at various levels try to contribute to information culture development at various levels through user education programmes. However, these programmes are not adequately planned in most cases, and turn out to be feeble and ineffective. This is partly due to lack of clear perception of the different aspects and levels of building up information user capabilities, and partly due to the lack of expertise and other resources.

Firstly, it is necessary to understand clearly the different types and facets of user education, and as to who should do what, where and how. For instance, the term user education is sometimes interchangeably used with 'user sensitisation', 'user orientation' and 'user assistance. (see Anppendix).

Secondly, a holistic and integrated approach to developing a dynamic information culture through the promotion of informacy at all levels is essential if people are to cope with and benefit from the emerging information environment.

Provision of user orientation, and user assistance relate to some particular information system or service, whereas user education relates to a more general educational activity. However, the three are interrelated and mutually synergistic. The term 'user sensitisation' is used when the target group to be oriented is composed of decision makers, planners, policy makers, managers, and others in the higher echelons of organisation's management.

The distinction and defining the scope of the different terms can help in identifying:

- the differences in the attributes of the user groups for preparing the sensitisation/learning/orientation exercises,
- the expertise needed to conduct such differentiated exercises,
- the appropriate time and place for conducting the exercises, and
- the appropriate methods and approaches necessary for performing the exercises [7, 8].

As indicated, user education is essentially an integral part of the education of the individual rather than a purely library/information centre activity. User orientation and user assistance on the other hand, are essentially activities of the information centre or library.

4. INFORMACY

Every individual collects, processes, generates, communicates, receives and uses information. These natural abilities of every person must be cultivated, refined and fine-tuned from early childhood so that the person fits in and contributes to a sustainable information society. Such transformation of the human being may be termed informacy (*cf.* literacy and numeracy).

An informacy programme should include

- developing the motivation, propensity and potential of the individual for seeking, processing and using relevant information for various purposes,
- creating an awareness of the information availability and information sources to meet different needs and situations,
- creating an awareness of the availability of different tools for and approaches to, information searching and accessing,
- developing the ability to extract, synthesise and repackage information to suit individual needs and convenience,
- developing communication skills,
- computer literacy, and
- improving the ability to use different media for information gathering, dissemination and communication.

Implementation of informacy programmes should begin at school, in formal and informal settings, graded as per the relevant educational and psychological principles. The propensity to seek and use information will get strengthened in the higher classes, and through college. An informate individual will need minimal orientation and assistance to use new information sources, services and facilities effectively and efficiently. And, later in the person's career, whatever be the chosen line of work, i.e., teaching, research, technical, managerial, business or any other profession—he/she will perform better in

mobilising and using relevant information, besides being a better communicator of information, and comfortable in using modern ITC. More subject specialists will be attracted to a career in the information area including ITC, in which they will find opportunities to challenge the best intellectuals in the country.

4.1 Programmes in Schools

Apart from the library orientation and user education exercises carried out by library and information centres, some schools in the country are providing courses at higher levels designed to introduce students to computer use. At the national level, the Department of Electronics of the Government of India, has introduced an accreditation scheme, known as the DoEACC Scheme in collaboration with the Computer Society of India and the Institute of Electronics and Telecommunications Engineers. Various types of courses available are: O Level (Foundation), A Level (Advanced Diploma); B Level (Graduate); and C Level (Post-graduate). Close to 450 institutes have been accredited under the scheme. Recently, the DoE has set up a new society for implementing the scheme.

There have been suggestions that computers could be installed in all high schools, using the constituency development fund of one crore rupees which is available to each Member of Parliament, so that the next generation of school children will be computer literate.

The advantages of using multimedia in teaching and learning, in Indian schools and colleges and in distance education, has been pointed out especially where adequately trained and experienced teachers may not be available. This realisation implies the augmentation of facilities for media literacy. However, only a few schools have adequate resources and expertise to train children in communication skills.

Informacy programmes should be an integral part of the national human resources development programme, and particularly embodied into the national education policy, plans and programmes. Implementation of an integrated informacy programme will enhance the use of information products and services, and also the demand for a wide range of innovative products and new services. The demand will pressurise the providers to obtain and/or design and develop new systems, products and services. This synergy will eventually lead to a higher ratio of the number of computers per person and the number of telecommunication facilities per person in the country, that may be comparable to that in other NIEs.

5. REFERENCES

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DIFFRENTIATION OF USER EDUCATION,USER ORIENTATION AND USER ASSISTANCE: EXAMPLES OF OBJECTIVES AND TASKS

User Education	*User Orientation*	*User Assistance*
Development of the propensity and potential for seeking and utilising information for problem solving, decision making, development, self education, etc	Provision of guidance for understanding the features of a specific or type of info system in relation to user's needs	Help in knowing subject coverage, limitations, etc. of a specific information source or database.
Creating awareness of availability of information relevant to different needs and situation	Provision of guidance on specific info/data sources accessible on a specific system	Help in interpreting the field/ data elements in an entry in a catalogue or a VDU display.
Creating awareness of availability of different tools for and approaches to, information accessing and searching.	Guidance in the use of specific tools, e.g., catalogue, thesaurus, terminal operations used in specific info system.	Assistance in abstracting, other manipulation of info retrieved for a specific query.
Developing the ability to extract synthesise and repackage information to suit individual requirements and convenience.	Developing familiarity with the outputs obtainable through a specific system.	